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ABSTRACT

Debaters have several poor word-choice and word-formation habits that detract from their ethos as advocates as well as from the clarity of their arguments. In many instances, debaters, to their competitive and educational detriment, employ habitual phrases, questionable redefinitions, and poorly coined new words. Many currently popular debate phrases, terms, and usages derive from the hardware of debate: the flowsheet, and the evidence card. A second important etymological source of "debatespeak," and the hardest to uproot, is precedent. There are methods, however, that coaches and teachers can use to improve debaters' lexical habits. Good speaking habits can be developed through practice rounds and drills. Coaches should avoid using debate jargon or theoretical terms, and should critique debaters' written arguments. The close relationship between thinking and good language use is a knowledge that is critical to any effective speaking or writing, in or out of debate. (SG)

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# Like It or Not, You Are Judged By Your Words.

ABSTRACT

Debaters have several poor word-choice and word-formation habits that detract from their ethos as advocates as well as from the clarity of their arguments. This paper examines the way debaters, to their competitive and educational detriment, employ habitual phrases, questionable redefinitions, and poorly-coined new words. After discussing the causes of these habits, the paper suggests methods that coaches and teachers might use to improve debaters' lexical habits.

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All of us, at some time, learned English under the tutelage of Miss Grundig, and we hated her. Merciless with the red pen, Miss Grundig was the one permanent fixture in every school, the one who looked 89 years old, the one that made us diagram sentences when all the other kids got to read Kurt Vonnegut. We hated her mostly because when anyone asked, "Can I go to the lavatory?" she would answer, mockingly, "I don't know; can you?" She thought she was doing us well by teaching us the distinction between "can" and "may." We, of course, correctly recognized her methods as child abuse, and had there been 1-800 hotlines, we'd have phoned in. I suppose it's the Miss Grundigs in the collective unconscious that cause people to say to me, when they discover that I teach English, "Oh, I'd better watch my grammar then." (I don't usually tell them that they are probably mistaking "grammar" for "usage," unless a perverse instinct for Grundig-like mischief comes upon me.)

Miss Grundig was too picky, and too righteous. She held herself up as a sacred guardian of language, and, ironically, in doing so, she took the living, growing creature that language is and fossilized it, perhaps because she was something of a fossil herself. But, for all of her faults, Miss Grundig's intentions were laudable. She recognized that effective communication depends in part on clarity and precision (even if she sometimes mistook those for formality and rigidity), and that the most potent use of words was marked by thoughtful consideration of what words can mean. She knew that you must pay attention to the

words you use, for you'll be understood, misunderstood, and judged by them.

Intercollegiate debaters need that lesson. They pay great attention, at the opening of a round, to defining the key terms of the resolution, and often argue about those definitions to the last speech. It seems, though, that after our students finish arguing terms, they lose the sensitivity to word meanings that they at first pretended to have. Debaters have some sloppy word-use habits, habits that are not as trivial as mistaking "can" for "may" because they either cloud the speaker's meaning, or detract from his ethos as an advocate. These habits, which stem from poor thinking or non-thinking about what words mean, fall into three general categories, all evident in the following passage:

> Specifically, on observation one, in terms of directionality, pull through the Garth card that Tom read in 1 NC, that says the Status Quo solves for 80% on-balance, which independently dejustifies the resolution.

I admit this is a parody, but it isn't far off the mark. Miss Grundig would be bothered, I suppose, by the abbreviation (1NC), or the failure to say "Professor" before Garth's name, or the fractured syntax. None of these bother me much. I am more disturbed, rather, by 1) the use of mindless, habitual phrases as fillers and transitions; 2) the redefinition of words beyond their imagistic or metaphoric roots; and 3) the use of non-words (or, more charitably, new words) whose meanings are at best imprecise, and at worst, nonsense.

Before I look at each of these categories, let me explain what I am not about. I am not trying to resurrect some "Golden

Age" of debate, an age when everyone spoke slowly and eloquently, no one used evidence, no one kept flow sheets, and no arguments culminated in nuclear war. That age, I am convinced, is the fictitious creation of the Miss Grundigs of the debate world. When I was a debater (which was presumably well after the Golden Age ended, to hear my coaches speak), I made the same language slips whereof I now write, and I suspect the same was true for my coaches. But even if the Golden Age did happen, the present style of debate can teach much that is valuable, if students are willing to learn: quick and critical thinking, organization, efficiency, creative research, and the importance and power of clear, economical speech.

Further, I am not in favor of imposing some sort of standard, formal, or "proper" diction, like BBC English, on intercollegiate debate. Debaters are not orators. Because of the nature of our activity, we have special communication needs: speed and signposting, for examples. Thus, debaters and judges live in a more-or-less closed lexical society; we have terms of art, jargon, slang, and our own codes and abbreviations. Usually, we understand each other. When we invent new words or add new denotations to old words, we are trying to fit some competitive purpose. Every time we do so, we affirm the vitality of our language, so long as our inventions contribute to understanding.

All too often, though, they do not. Perhaps this is because although our lexical community is closed, it is not hermetically sealed. We rely on the culture surrounding us for the words

whose meanings we juggle, for the raw material from which we create new words, and, ultimately, for the referents for all of the words that we use. All judges (but, unfortunately, not all debaters) have important lives outside of debate: social lives, professional lives, family lives, political lives. From these, judges bring into the back of the room a lexicon of the everyday, a set of ideas from the "real world" which they will use as a basis for comparison--a referent--for understanding the surreal world of debatespeak. If a debater's word use departs too radically from those referents, then a judge can't understand the speaker as well as he'd like to. Such a lack of understanding has caused more than one debate round to be lost--and that isn't the judge's fault.

Of course, the issue of winning or losing predominates in most debaters' minds, but much more is at stake. Debate, whether we intend it to be or not, is educational. As we are teaching critical thinking, logic, and research skills, we are also teaching and reinforcing language habits. If, either through active instruction or passive indifference, we teach an insensitivity to words, we deny our students a valuable lesson in the power of language, a power that can help them win rounds, and, moreover, a power they will need if they are to succeed as adults.

So I am not arguing that we throw out our jargon, our terms of art, or all of the ways we invent debate words. I am arguing that we use all of them intelligently, and that we use debate to

teach, along with all of the other good things it teaches, something about the smart use of words.

Let's now look at each of the three categories of bad lexical habits I outlined above.

1. Mindless habitual phrases.

I suppose some of my criticisms here have a Grundig-like pettiness about them. That is probably because this problem is by far the mildest, and the easiest to correct. In fact, we are always correcting it. When I was a scholastic debater, we used to always fill up space between arguments by referring to "today's debate." Someone noted that we obviously weren't engaged in tomorrow's debate, and that we probably had three or four more debates "today," so the phrase was laughed out of competition. There are a few more phrases deserving such laughter, because they represent the same thoughtlessness. The first of these is the phrase, "in terms of." A "term" is a word with a precise, often technical meaning, and the phrase pretty clearly implies that the speaker is going to use the "terms" associated with the topic following the "of." But most of the time a debater uses that phrase, she is not speaking in "terms" of anything. To say "in terms of observation 2, I have 3 arguments," is meaningless. How can one speak "in terms of observation 2?" What sort of "terms" does it have?

Related to the "in terms of" transition is the thoughtless use of the word, "specifically." Debaters are famous for throwing out this word when they are not being specific about anything. It is used to begin complicated arguments

("specifically, I have 7 subpoints"), introduce evidence ("specifically, turn to Jones in '87," usually followed by a nonspecific, conclusionary "blurb"), and to transition between arguments ("turn now, specifically, to their first contention," usually a nonspecific third of the case).

Another thoughtless, habitual phrase that is equally worthy of our jocular enmity is "we solve for _____," as in, "we solve for 25,000 accidents a year." Such a phrase reduces public policy issues to high-school algebra. We "solve for" x in quadratic equations, but not in medical-care crises or international emergencies. Some people might argue that, metaphorically, we do perform a sort of algebra on these issues, but that metaphor breaks down pretty rapidly when you remember that politicians are not political scientists. Besides, is it not more accurate, and stronger, to say "we reduce accidents by 25,000," or "we improve the economic welfare of thousands of people"? My point is that the everyday language not only communicates more clearly, but also sounds more intelligent and more human; the speaker gains ethos; she becomes more believable. Further, strong, accurate verbs like "reduce" or "improve" carry an emotive power that the sterile, mathematical "we solve for" lacks. In close rounds, that emotive power, as well as ethos, can grant an argument significance that it otherwise wouldn't have.

2) Questionable redefinitions, or, in debatespeak, "extradefinitionality."

My criticisms here may also sound a little Grundigesque, but, I hope, less so than previously. Here I am not saying that debaters misuse words. The usages I criticize are not misuses because, in the closed lexical world of debate, we've corporately decided to use certain words in certain ways, the "standard" usage or definition notwithstanding. Such new definitions almost everyone understands; we use them routinely in debates and they communicate ideas. I criticize our new, arbitrary definitions, rather, because they don't make good lexical sense. As with senseless fillers, many of our redefinitions don't exploit the image-power and emotive-power of words. These weak redefinitions have usually devolved through thoughtlessness, rather than through intelligent word-coining. Let me give one example.

It seems now that every affirmative case begins with a series of "observations," or, occasionally, "overviews." Curiously, these "observations" are usually accompanied by an argumentative structure and much expert-opinion evidence, implying that the affirmative team is presenting something they've inferred or reasoned, rather than something they've seen. The word "observation" denotes direct sensory experience of a fact or phenomenon, and connotes detachment, impartiality, and objectivity--qualities most affirmative teams lack. Similarly, we have corrupted the word "overview" (which denotes standing well above something and viewing it in breadth) to mean any argument that appears, on the flow chart, "over" the "case structure." Thus, the negative team that argues against such

"observations" or "overviews" is accusing the affirmative not of faulty reasoning, but of poor eyesight.

Perhaps a while back, perhaps in the Golden Age, someone began an affirmative case with observations that really were observations; since then, "observation" in the debatespeak glossary has meant "a theoretical or procedural argument that precedes substantive, or case argument," sort of like a lawyer's pretrial motion. It may seem rather harmless that we have arbitrarily assigned a new denotation to the word; after all, everyone in the debating community knows what is meant by that word in that context. The trouble is, we've divorced the word from all of the rich connotations that the root verb, "to observe" affords, and for no good reason. Even worse, we are being intellectually dishonest when we grant the ethical privilege of a scientist's observation to debatable propositions. Much better words, much more accurate words, are available to convey what we really mean by "observation": words like "proposition," "premise," "inference," or, even "contention."

Many might flinch at this last suggestion: after all, don't contentions only go in "case," instead of "above case?" To this I answer, "says who?" To say that contentions belong only to "case" (substantive argument) further exemplifies our nonthinking use of language. We let a narrow, arbitrary idea about argumentative structure limit the words that we choose to present our position. Instead, as George Orwell said in "Politics and the English Language," we ought to choose the words that most precisely express what we want to mean.

Debaters have likewise redefined words like "subpoint" (now meaning any individual argument, whether it is subdivided or not), "linearity" (usually meaning that there exists some chartable cause-effect relationship, usually without a "threshold," whether it graphs as a line or not), and "solvency" (a term either from banking or the chemistry of solvents that is almost never used in a worthwhile metaphoric sense). Extradefinitionality also extends to phrases. Debaters call arguments "value objections" when they are nowhere objecting to a value (usually we are offering an alternative value by which to judge a round), and ask judges by way of a mixed metaphor to "look at the round on balance" without ever telling him what is supposed to go on either tray of the scales.

The problem in all of these cases is that the words we use, although they are more or less clear, communicate only as arbitrary labels, not as image-and-idea evoking signs. The most potent words in our lexicon evoke a strong image in the listener's mind, an image that represents or symbolizes the idea behind the word to him. I am not speaking here of poetic symbolism, or anything that complicated, but of words like "see," "cut," "fight," "reflect," "waste," and "injury." These words communicate because they engage our imagination as well as our abstract cognition. When we carelessly accept new definitions of words that don't somehow play off of the image content, emotive content, and value content innate in a word, we boil away the most flavorful part of the way it communicates. We then cannot say as much as we want to as briefly as we need to.

And, of course, our redefinitions are in many cases only "more or less" clear, as I put it above. Why settle for almost clear when clarity is possible? A clear argument will prevail over an unclear argument in any judge's mind.

3) The invention of non-words (or new words)

We like to say, metaphorically, that English is a "living" language. What we mean is that old, unneeded words and usages die (except in the pages of the OED) and new, needed words and usages are born, just as in a living organism old cells die and new cells take their place. But not all new words contribute to the health of a living language, just as not all cells--fat, or cancer, for example--contribute to the healthy functioning or natural growth of a body. Words which dissipate or obfuscate meaning are like those unhealthy cells.

Debaters coin some interesting words whose contribution to our philological health is dubious: "resolutionality," "specificness," "dejustify," "intrinsicality," "directionality," and "underview" are all, to the best of my knowledge, debater-created words that reside in no dictionary.

My favorite of this group is the last. Because "overview," in debatespeak, means arguments physically positioned "over" the case on the notepad, any argument physically positioned "under" the case must be an "underview." The word, so defined and used, is silly. "Underviews" view nothing, nor do they view it from "under" anything. (In mining, there is, or was, a person called an "underviewer," to which the debate usage has no discernable connection--except that it sometimes it takes a mine inspector to

get to the bottom of some debaters' logic.) Usually, underviews contain either preemptive arguments or theoretical and procedural arguments that couldn't find a home in an "overview." Why not call these arguments what they are instead of inventing a nonsense word that ignores the fundamental imagistic and positional sense of both "under" and "to view?"

As with redefinition, our thoughtless word-coining shows an insensitivity to the way words work; it teaches a sloppiness about language use. The other new words I've noted, like "directionality" or "dejustify," reflect a different kind of sloppiness. Each of these words is formed by taking a word, like "direct," which is fairly concrete when left to its own devices, and glueing on prefixes or suffixes that make the word abstract, sometimes to the point of non-meaning. (Miss Grundig might add that these words are ugly and unappealing to the ear, but trying to teach euphony to debaters is a lost cause.) This sort of wordmaking appeals to debaters, though. First, it's easy. You just have to find a word that in some way suggests what you mean, then slap on whatever extra syllables you need. Such ease makes it almost unnecessary for debaters to really <u>think</u> about word use. Debaters also like this kind of wordmaking because the abstract words that it engenders sound, to some, intellectual. To me, though they sound like pretentious, pseudo-intellectual ways of saying something that is probably pretty simple. But I can't be sure because the meaning of such words is usually too vague.

In competition, that vagueness can hurt, and not just because the judge can't understand poorly-worded arguments. An astute team can turn its opposition's vague terminology against them by suggesting interpretations unfavorable to the word-coiners' position. For example, I've heard several negative teams argue that their job was to "dejustify" the resolution. A sharp affirmative team would readily assent to this, pointing out that the verb, "to dejustify," implies that the negative team's job is to reverse, remove, or reduce ("de-") something that has already been justified. In other words, the resolution is presumed justified until the negative team dejustifies it. Negative teams have enough of a struggle as it is without carelessly abandoning presumption through slips of the tongue. Unfortunately, negative teams are rarely caught up in such lexical full-nelsons, because their opponents are as insensitive to word meanings as they themselves are.

The missed opportunities for linguistic jujitsu are too numerous, and they are not just matters of "semantics." In fact, those who label such word-choice questions "mere semantics" devalue the act and importance of sign-making. Semantics governs our understanding of substance. That is why international treaties, trade agreements, business contracts, and public laws are never approved until the <u>semantics</u>--the sign-choice--is agreed on by all, or a majority of, the involved parties, even if they all agree on the principles and the substantive issues beneath the words. If word choice can have such consequence in

the "real world," the advocacy situations for which we are supposedly preparing debaters, ought it not in debate?

I'm not saying that debate rounds ought to be won or lost because of sophistry or linguistic hijinks. But teams can use such semantic arguments in at least three ways: 1) to establish argumentative ground more favorable for their own position; 2) to diminish the significance of opposing argumentation; 3) to gain a tactical advantage by making the opposition burn time to explain itself. And such arguments are easiest to make when faced with a thoughtlessly-constructed new word, or with a poorly thought-out redefinition.

As I've suggested throughout this essay, poor use of words often reveals flawed thinking, and I've pointed out what I believe to be some of the thinking flaws (to include laziness) behind debatespeak. But I think two more thinking flaws need to be exposed, the two flaws which are probably the most responsible for our lexical bad habits.

First, many currently popular debate phrases, terms, and usages derive from the hardware of debate: the flowsheet and the evidence card. It's funny how today, when most students create "briefs" by putting three or four quotations on standard-sized typing sheets, an individual quotation or bit of evidence is still called a "card." And in competition, speakers put great emphasis on these "cards:" "The Mills card proves" . . . "I read you cards, they only gave you analysis" . . . "We gave you three good cards to their one blurb." This great emphasis suggests

that many believe that rounds are lost and won by appeals to authority, not by the good arguments and meaningful conclusions that a good advocate draws from expert-opinion evidence.

Evidence, of course, matters greatly in a round, and it ought to. But the privilege that our speech gives it implies that many believe evidence is, in the end, all that matters. Debaters think they don't need to speak clearly because their "cards" do all of their talking for them. This might be why constructive speeches are often so clear while rebuttal speeches--where rounds are really won and lost--are such a mess. We hear lots of cards in constructive speeches, and the authorities on the cards are usually pretty good with language. In rebuttals, though, the debater has to rely on her own linguistic resources--and often, she flounders.

Similar is debatespeak's incessant reference to the flowsheet. I've already described the etymology of "overview" and "underview," but in addition we have phrases like "move to the _____ portion of the flow," "pull through" an argument (a command, I guess, to draw a long line) and the terms "case" and "off case," reflecting the almost universal division of arguments on the flowsheet.

Notetaking is essential in winning or judging a round, and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with referring to the standard note-taking system. But the high incidence of references to "the flow" in debaters' language indicates a belief that rounds are won or lost on a legal pad. <u>In no case is that true</u>. All debate rounds are won or lost in the judge's mind. Even in

the most meticulously "flowed" round, the judge has to exercise what her title implies: judgement. She decides which arguments count, which arguments count less, and which arguments don't count at all. Clear, thoughtful language can cause her to decide which arguments will count the most--even, sometimes, when their substantive content isn't deserving.

Beside debate hardware, there is second important etymological source of debatespeak, and the hardest to uproot: precedent. All of debate's mindless transitions, redefinitions, and new words are started by some fairly bright people, and those people use them intelligently to win lots of debates. Less-successful debaters, thinking that in "style," rather than in hard work and harder thought lies the secret of winning, mindlessly copy the trendy style--the trendy words--of winning debaters. We ought to learn from our betters, but those who copy in this manner insure their own future mediocrity, because they become mimics, even worse, puppets, whose own voices are incapable of expressing the new, creative thoughts that decide close rounds. When you acquiesce to someone else's words, you also acquiesce to his mind, often losing your own in the process. That isn't a good idea, because you'll need it for rebuttals.

How, then, do we develop the habit of intelligent word choice in debaters? Of course, it is neither reasonable nor possible to demand perfection in word-use, even if we had a way to measure it. A debater cannot afford to spend all of his time at the podium weighing the nuances of synonyms; a debater too conscious about word use might not even get an argument out. He

often has to choose the first word in his mind that approximates his meaning. Nevertheless, there are some ways coaches and judges can train debaters to find better, more precise first words.

First, and most obvious, good speaking habits can be developed through coaching attention in practice rounds and drills. When a coach critiques argumentative and strategic slips, he might as well also critique the language problems that either reduce clarity or ethos. Likewise, judges could discuss lexical issues in oral and written critiques.

Second, when discussing possible arguments and strategies with their debaters, coaches can at times deliberately avoid using any debate jargon or theoretical terms. Instead, they could use the same sort of language you'd hear in a Philosophy, Law, or Economics class. This sometimes drives my students crazy, but it also opens them to the possibilities of an argument and the limitations of our specialized language.

But coaches will do the most to improve clear word use by closely critiquing anything that is debater-written for presentation in a round, such as first affirmative constructive speeches and stock negative briefs. These precomposed pieces do much to establish the debate's lexical field, which is the set of important terms that will be tossed around by both sides throughout the round. Therefore, clarity and precision in "canned" arguments has a chance of carrying through to the latest speeches.

In need of much coaching scrutiny are the "tags," or summarizing titles that debaters slap on the top of their "cards." Because these tags frequently become argument titles on the "flow," they also do much to establish the round's lexical field. Our students, in their misguided zeal for economy, have composed some embarrassingly bad tags: "Guns=less rights"; "Contras hurt drugs"; "Democracy good." Given the vagueness of these titles, it's not surprising that we hear so much unclear argumentation, and so much misused evidence: the debaters don't understand their "tags" any better the judges listening to them do. Perhaps if coaches scrutinized and corrected these, our debaters would understand and use their own evidence better--and sound more intelligent.

To conclude, I am not suggesting that debaters adopt formal, stilted diction, throw down their flow charts, burn their evidence, and humble themselves before the idol of eloquence. In fact, I am not even interested in eloquence, if by eloquence you mean aureate, poetic language. I am interested in the thoughtful use of words in competition, the sort of word use that makes the debater's meaning plain and clear. Of course, even good word choice and intelligent use of language cannot win rounds any more than evidence, by itself, can: bad arguments, when they are succinctly formulated, are revealed in all their badness. But a clear, understandable argument, phrased with strong, image-evoking language, will usually prevail over an argument which is muddy or abstract. Debaters, like it or not, are judged by their words.

But more important, if we teach, emphasize, and reinforce intelligent word use, debaters who are learning about logic, research, and public policy issues are also learning about language--how it works and how it fails, the source of its power and how to exploit it. They will also learn about the close relationship between thinking and good language use, a knowledge that is critical to any effective speaking or writing, in or out of debate. And, if nothing else, they will have an even chance of facing Miss Grundig at their ten-year high-school reunion (and yes, she'll still be teaching) without mistaking "can" for "may."